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## ***Ghardhandha*: a neglected political discourse**

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**Abstract:** In Nepal, women's political representation became an immense human-rights based discourse in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006). Although the importance of women's representation in mainstream politics was better realized after the Interim Constitution of 2007 mandated a 33% gender quota law in all public spheres, a lasting change in gender equality seemed quite distant. This article focuses on the practice of *Ghardhandha*, which is a deep-rooted, but fundamentally complicated power structure that not only constrains women's other progress but also impacts on intersectional gender balance in the long term. This study is based on the fieldwork of Longho Kahli village and Pokhara Lekhnath Metropolitan City during the political upheaval in the years 2013-2015. The present study questions the controversial boundaries between contemporary representative politics and the tradition of *Ghardhandha*, a substantive political process in which I found a socio-political reality of segregated power relations in everyday livelihoods compared to state affairs. I explore this basic asymmetry from the perspective of the interlocutors through in-depth interviews and participant observation, which are the major focus for analysis and discussion.

**Keywords:** Nepal, *Ghardhandha*, women, gender equality, *samajik* vs. *rajinirik*, politics.

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore women's intertwined socio-political relationships and their oscillating identity in contemporary shifting politics from a pre-conflict to a post-conflict period in Nepal. By the term *oscillating*, I mean women's changing roles and responsibilities in the informal political process, which has been influenced by the dichotomy of culture and rituals (henceforth referred to as *Ghardhandha*) and social practices. So far, this has been represented as an unrecognized and unimportant phenomenon in formal politics while, at the same time, being considered a fundamental basis of family and household relationship.

The concept of *Ghardhandha* in terms of ethnographic knowledge is a synchronized term with two basic motivations – '*Ghar/Grihastha*' and '*Dhandha*'. *Ghar* generally refers to husband's house where a woman comes after marriage, possibly to spend all her life. Females are generally understood by birth as service providers to others' households. Women's identity and status vary according to time and situation, but they seem detrimental to their household norms depending on caste, religion, ethnicity, and so on. In the *Tamu* community, women's status is synonymously used as *Gharko Ama* (housemother) after marriage, and *chhori manchhe*, which literally means a female person, before marriage at the natal home. *Ghar/Grihastha* is thus affiliated to marital relationship, which - if someone denies accepting a role and a responsibility - would mean that she/he has not completed the ritual and social norms.

Despite a 33% gender policy amendment in legislation to end all forms of long-standing gender, sex and social inequality, gender bias is still a common practice and seems almost unnoticed in everyday life. For instance, a woman would not deserve to be a household head while her husband is alive, but there is a common understanding that they are part of each other. However, except for a few instances, patriarchal practice, which gives preference to sons, is an important custom, and hence it is one of the most expected domestic norms to give birth to a son to maintain next of family kin. Similarly, *dhandha* literally refers to household works done by women but is rather indicative of maintaining a myriad of household family relationships and responsibilities including economic maintenance of family and house. It is a mode of respect and care to the elders and juniors by relation and is an important motivation to maintain good family relationships throughout the family. A girl is well trained in possible duties regarding all the

household works for a successful future marital life. However, a girl or a woman - until her marriage - is not always weak in informal power relations at her natal home, because she deserves respect and household power and authority as *chelibeti*, literally meaning daughter as a guest by ritual norm. Hence, husband's sisters and his elder brother's children also need to be cared for by the newcomer bride of that family. One of the ostensible realities of *Ghardhandha* is that next of the kin goes to the son, but at the same time household power and authority to handle daily performance in the locus of *Ghar* usually belongs to the mother or a woman. Moreover, a reason given behind respect, authority and power to a girl child entails that she should know all family secrets, such as roots of family lineage, method of worshipping ancestors, whom to respect and care, the mode of language use, what to offer family members, guests and neighbours (meals, snacks, tea, cigarettes or local liquor) and ways to save expenditure. These are the notable skills, just like her mother did, which is an obscure and complex reality in most Nepalese families in the perspective of *Samajik* and cultural notions.

The notion *Samajik* from ethnographic knowledge is that every day is supposed to be caring and nurturing with a high sense of humour and humanity, and if it is lacking or if someone tries to neglect it, the family harmony might be loose or imbalanced and family conflicts can emerge. Similarly, the reason behind conflict in the family has often been generalized to power conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which seems a superficial assumption without analysing the complicated informal power hierarchy in the family. The reason behind such conflict is not only mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law but that in the power hierarchy even a son is also lower in the family hierarchy than his mother and father while they are still alive. In addition, a mother in most instances plays a catalyst role to manage the meagre family resources for maintaining good family relationships according to rituals and family norms. A mother is always higher in authority and power than her son, due to the mode of respect, which according to *Samajik* code is called *mannuparne*.

In many instances people also use the notion *Samajik* to mean providing basic goods and services to the groups and community people in an equal manner by *mannuparne* and *jajmani* (caste hierarchy) mode of notion rather than by the notion of *Rajnitik*. The notion of *Rajnitik* (meaning politics) for ethnographic knowledge is conflict creator among the individuals and groups of hamlets and to the whole community. Thus, relatives in most households prefer the notion of *Samajik* that is closer to influencing daily activities and more important to the *Ghardhandha* than *Rajnitik*.

Arranged marriage is mostly preferred to get a well-trained bride for a man and his family to perform all such aforementioned activities in the locus of *Ghardhandha* or else *Ghar* remains unsuccessful and inauspicious. Besides giving birth and caring for the children to maintain the patriline, a woman should be a good service provider to her husband's consanguine relatives and all elders, youngsters and especially husband's parents in their old age. For a peasant family, it seems important to have a pair of animals for manure and meat, and hence collecting food and fodders for them from the nearest forest and fields are the very basic components of *Ghardhandha*. Similarly, collecting dry leaves for animal's bed and dry woods for fuel to cook meals, collecting wild vegetables and fruits in different seasons, and purchasing daily needs from the nearest market, and more especially engaging in growing vegetables and crops, processing them and preserving after threshing and cleaning is a well-known *Dhandha* in the premises of *Ghar* that requires a lot of time, skill and dedication both physically and mentally. Even so, in most instances it is always women in the Nepalese kitchen, who cook and serve food, clean and wash dishes and clothes. In addition, weaving handmade local goods and materials, such as *Bhangra* (native cloth used for holding things at the back, especially to hold sickle and other material while collecting fodder and fuel in the jungle), weaving sitting mats of rice stalks and maize husk (*gundri* and *chakati*), making

local wine or liquor (rakshi) and looking after children and aging people (for instance, in-laws and relatives) at home are other most important *Ghardhandha* activities. These sorts of time and energy consuming activities that render little or no value in a contemporary capitalist market economy are practised in both villages and towns. This further hinders women in being part of other formal basic life requirements such as education, health and so. As we all generalize women's lack of position in public sectors to be a result of a lack of good education, finance, etc., many studies suggest that there are other essential responsible factors, which are different from one country to another all over the globe.

In the case of Nepal, the notion of *Ghardhandha* is still a least acknowledged practice yet a very fundamental phenomenon by which everyone is affected on a daily basis. As a result, human rights, patriotism, citizenship rights, property rights and power redistribution in the political arena are still a matter of stern grievance. Hence, this paper claims that the notion *Ghardhandha* should not be overlooked and should rather be taken as an important aspect of life, which should be properly communicated in its depth; otherwise women's substantive representation in politics through a feminist gender frame will not move in the right direction. *Ghardhandha* is a phenomenon that has hardly been discussed in public fora, and even if someone tries to uncover it, one can easily be distorted by being told that it is a family matter or a social ritual and a part of culture. However, on hindsight, *Ghardhandha* bears a common sharing norm, not only among women but also men in my settings. Thus, clearly the structure of *Ghardhandha* is a fundamental system for every household to enhance everyday life style and is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding beyond the universal gender and sex equality of the existing formal political system. It is for this reason I argue that without looking at such social complex and asymmetries, the question about gender equality, social justice, equal opportunity, and fair democratization via formal policy would only be a mere part and parcel of a formal representative politics rather than having substantive impact on gender power relationships. In such a context, a number of questions can easily be raised against equality policy bills and its implications. One particular question would be the equality among women of multiple identities and status asking: 'Can women representatives address all women's interest while they hold political office?' And the other general question would be: 'Can women do politics without any earlier experiences since they are good only for housework? And 'is there no meeting point between the formal gender theory and an informal practice such as ghardhandha?' These sorts of questions directly point to not only gender and sex but rather toward a complicated behavioural practice motivated either by traditional gender structure or imposed by modern gender equality or a mixture of both. Hence, without examining the complicated relationship of *Ghardhandha* practice, the notion gender and sex equality in isolation remains further fragmented and ambiguous since the nature of equality bills mandated by state policy is itself bounded by fragmentation and ambivalences (Rai 2008). Lober (1994; 2000) and Childs (2006) also rightly claim that the formal gender equality regime did not have an effect in the substantive representation of women since gender divisions still deeply bifurcate in the structure of society.

As mentioned above, an important aspect of *Ghardhandha* is the notion of '*Samajik*' which literally means to be social. This is very much indicative of innate human needs and a number of relational variables according to its social codes. On the one hand, people seem proactive to maintain everyday household matters in place, whereas on the other hand, they want to have a territorial or state solidarity and unity to show power. This sometimes creates conflicts in a kind of contradictory informal phenomenon. One example of how they show unity, solidarity and brotherhood is a term that refers to the user group of the same water source termed as '*yeutai dharako pani khane manche*' (persons or user groups who use common source of drinking water in a certain area). It is indicative of living in the same physical locus or territory within social

consensus where customs, identity, behaviour and problems are shared. This is one of the crucial bases for showing unity. These sorts of practices could be observed directly during the general and local elections where even sex and gender norms seemed obscure as these cultural aspects found more importance than sex, gender, individuals, or groups.

The Constituent Assembly election held in 2008 and 2013 elected 33% and 29% women candidates respectively as members of parliament. It showed an evidence of policy implementation in representative politics in the political history of Nepal. Women from all backgrounds, including Dalits and ethnic groups, were also represented through this gender policy. More importantly, women also earned their participation in local elections held in 2017 with a mandated number after a long stalemate, due to political transition. Selection of candidates was recommended by local unit/organization of each party, which was later sanctioned or decided by their central committees. However, before election, during election and after election in most instances, most people used their social code while selecting the candidates as “*Yeutai dharako pani khane manchhe*”, which was indicative of the significance of territorial or local relationship bound by social and cultural solidarity, where even renowned politicians who came from other villages/ towns or districts failed to win the election. This may be explained mostly with reference to people’s beliefs in their own communal candidacy rather than in newcomers migrated from other parts or districts to hold political positions. This was repeated even in the federal and parliamentary elections held in December 2017 in my study area. In such a case people would not care whether they were male or female or whether they were from their own caste or ethnic groups. The main criterion for candidacy was to ensure that the candidate belonged to the same district or local area.

The practice of *Ghar and Ghardhandha* seems to exist at party or political office in diverse forms. These structures also seem connected beyond formal political norms in an innate humanitarian everyday locus or *Ghar*. The aforementioned social code, as well as gender quota policy, appears to be an abstract and controversial notion which carries no boundaries, but at the same time there seems to be a lot of boundaries. While the territorial notion becomes a norm, gender or sexual politics seems obscure as a result of which most of the interlocutors themselves had preferred to be categorized ‘*Samajik*’ instead of *Rajnity*, explaining that their daily work was ‘*sitting at home and doing nothing but never having free time*’ when asked about their profession. Likewise, their response to the long insurgency and post conflict situation not only carries partition, conflicts and quarrel but also several intertwined relations that have been practised as seen in a number of complexities. It has also been observed that while political consciousness is heightened, social consciousness decreases. As a result, a social symmetry as such is entailed in a distinctive notion between knowledge and motivational factors. Nonetheless, *Ghardhandha* throughout the process of ethnographic knowledge explores opaque and contradictory aspects within family, kin and group of caste and ethnicity according to social hierarchy, where social hierarchy itself diverges in a number of codes practiced in a distinctive way followed by “dos and don’ts” leading to controversy within and outside the family. For instance, power hierarchy within male versus male, female versus male and female versus female is not only determined by family relations, but also by intra-caste and ethnicity. A more surprising fact is that the notion of unity and solidarity in relation to brotherhood and sisterhood is beyond family, sex, and gender practice as mentioned above, but this is rather detrimental in regards to *Mannuparne* (mode of respect according to hierarchy among social and family relations) and *Jajmani* (hierarchy among caste according to religious ideology and practice). *Mannuparne* and *jajmani* practice in terms of caste and individual ethnicity might have been transferred from generation to generation to establish solidarity and unity within family and towards other social realms. Hence, conflicts can be seen in the practice of territorial brotherhood and sisterhood (Gray 1995; Cameron 1998; Bennett 2002). In this sense, the common notion of *Samajik* coded as “*yeutai dharako panikhane manche*” is not

only indicative of family activities but also represents an important territorial notion for brotherhood and sisterhood, which for a long time have been attributed to unseen/abstract relationships in everyday practice, which was reflected during the time of elections and electoral processes, especially in selecting the political candidates.

More than 90 percent of women's main occupation seems to be *Ghardhandha*, which is recognized as an important activity to maintain household economy but not in any way considered important in many formal aspects. Most of the women have designated their occupation as '*Ghar ma basne*' literally meaning: sitting at home but indicative to not only physical body but also their part of traditional economic practice where even many males are involved in shared household activities. Many of my elder male interlocutors in *Longho Kahli* said that formal education was not that easy to access due to household activities since their source of income was only agriculture in their farm. As one of my interlocutor said:

I was the middle child of our parents. At that time, farm work was everyone's part of life [...] It was only me as a middle child to give hand for my parents since no one was at home to look after our younger sister. So my further education was not possible after primary school. Moreover, everyone's preference was household work rather than children's education. Those who had chance for school education was just by incidence rather than self-awareness, like in my elder brother's case who is now doing a job as an overseer while I am sitting at home.

In the case of Pokhara Lekhnath city, a few males these days dare to explore *Ghardhandha*, especially if their wives are involved in wage market or other jobs. Cooking for family, taking care of infants and babies such as changing nappies and feeding them, taking care of old parents, washing clothes, cleaning dishes and utensils, sweeping, mopping and coating floors with cow dung and mud in the case of village, weaving mats and traditional clothes like *Bhangra* (a handmade local sack) and *kambal* (a handmade woolen rug) are normally not males' jobs within household norms. This sort of practice tells them to refuse *Ghardhandha* and seek other occupations, which is not an easy option. As a result, daughters and sisters are knowingly and unknowingly taught and socialized to share *Ghardhandha* from the early childhood and more importantly getting them married accordingly as soon as possible. This is a kind of labour exchange, on the one hand, and to maintain rituals and cultural beliefs of custom, on the other. Yet, they are not considered economically active and instead seen as dependent population, which is a biased or false definition of the labour they do at home (Acharya 1994; Acharya 2012; Bennett 1981). Research concerning women has found that women have been traditionally dominant both in family and field; however, this presents a distorted picture of occupational segregation (Padia 2011).

The current political changes in the country encourages women to be organized in different types of political roles such as *Ama Samuha* (mothers groups) to perform saving and credit for individuals and groups, for wild life and soil conservation, building and maintenance of village roads, schools and temples for their community, following the norms of *Samajik*. More importantly, these days women are also involved in formal politics through quota systems both in national and local level politics. Yet female politicians who have the experience of taking part in politics are not in good positions to handle their career, due to their traditional role and responsibility at home and society. Neither the policy-makers nor the pre-eminent groups of theorists, who favour universal equal rights and justice, have been aware of the number of other important social and cultural aspects that have emerged through the context of social and cultural

history in the daily lives of women. Moreover, women's position or identity is defined through a number of invisible political processes among which the performance of *Ghardhandha* is the most important, however in an oscillating manner, which this paper aims to explore.

## 2. Methodology

The present article is based on field data carried out in *Longho-Kahli* village and Pokhara Lekhnath Metropolitan City between 2013 and 2015. During this period, Nepal was undergoing a political upheaval as a result of its long post-conflict transition. It was also a period when the country had failed to promulgate its new constitution from the first Constituent Assembly (CA) after four years of exercise (2008 -2012) and had to ultimately go for the second CA election in 2013. Hence, this article is not free from the aspects that are the outcome of the political upheavals during the course of my research. In the course of interactions with female interlocutors of both the settings, '*Ghardhandha*' turned out to be a prominent concept, thus giving rise to one of the important analytical findings in my thesis, from which this paper emerged. In the process, the ethnography of *Longho-Kahli* village became the focus of my study after having done some in-depth interviews and participatory observation with women politicians who were affiliated to both old and emerging major political parties namely, Nepal Communist Party United Marxist-Leninist (CPNUML), Nepal Communist Party United Marxist Leninist Maoist (UCPN-M), Nepali Congress (NC) and Federal Socialist Party in Pokhara.

During my field visits, I observed that most villagers' main occupation was subsistence agriculture. Some of them are practicing traditional animal husbandry (yak, sheep and buffaloes) on the base of Mordi Himal where they also collect the famous herb *Yarsagumba* (*ophiocordyceps sinensis*) in season. This is a new cash earning method with almost equal involvement of both men and women. The village is widely diverse regarding caste and ethnicity and famous for home-stay and tea garden by its *Tamu* community.

After conducting some meetings and in-depth interviews, my research thirst oriented me to explore the feelings of "the basic groups of householders" in their village of *Longho Kahli* where most of the men and women represented social ritual norms and values. However, they also seemed bound with the modern economic world market as established by the World Trade Organization (WTO). My interlocutors had commonly categorized their everyday labour production as "Just sitting at home and doing nothing and never having any free time". This compelled me to think and study their shared inferiority complex over such significant tasks, rather than focusing on the literal meanings.

Both primary data and published sources have been used while preparing this study. The theme of the paper is structured in the framework of interlocutors' idioms and phrases observed in the fieldwork. In doing so, I visited most of the party headquarters in Pokhara Lekhnath Metropolitan City to observe how political parties conducted their activities and whether parties seemed gender friendly as mandated by the state policy, following the promulgation of the Interim Constitution of 2007. Similarly, I was also curious to observe how Village Development Committees (VDC) and government offices conducted programs for people living in the villages and cities in the post-conflict transition of Nepal. For the in-depth study, I visited most wards of *Longho Kahli* village. I also participated in some of the events conducted by national and international agencies during my fieldwork. Hence, the data in my study are collected through my personal network, field ethnography and public networks like party offices, District Development offices, municipality offices and VDCs offices. I recorded all interviews in a recorder for later analysis and discussion. I used an interview guideline for the conversations during the session.

Initially, ten preliminary interviews were taken for analysis and discussion from the existing major political parties of Nepal where four female interviewees from CPN-UML, four CPN-

Maoists and two from NC were interviewed from February to March 2013. During the course of interviews held just before the second CA election, a number of new parties emerged, demanding caste and ethnic inclusion in mainstream politics. This situation led me to including one of them, namely the Federal Socialist Party led by Ashok Rai, who was a former member of parliament from CPN (UML). Until then, most of my interviewees were general, executive members and members of parliament, belonging to major political parties in municipalities and districts. After interviewing the female politicians, I interviewed some government and non-government officials and common people, both men and women. The questions for the interviews were based on the interlocutors' past and present life style, current positions, their families, their future plans and their political and social involvement. Their facial expressions, body language tone and emotions were observed during and even after the interviews. Most of the interviews were done in local Nepali language, but in the Tamu villages I used both Tamu and Nepali language. After going through transcribed versions several times and observing the findings in the data process, I found five themes among which 'Ghardhandha' was one of the fundamental themes that I chose for further discussion and analysis.

### 3. Context and theoretical framework

Until 1990, there was only a 5 percent state mandated policy to involve women in the House of Parliament of Nepal (Acharya 1994). However, political participation of women could be seen via two-dimensional frameworks: in mass movements during the times of crisis and other sustained political activities in different political histories. However, research reports showed women's political involvement as sporadic and not sustainable when it comes to holding major positions. Hisila Yami, a renowned female politician, notes that political consciousness against pervasive vulnerability and marginalized position in power relations in the central system was encouraged once again after the CPN-Maoists involved women in armed combat during the insurgency period. This was aimed at ending all kinds of discriminatory practices and to show a new tendency in the political history of Nepal (Yami 2007). She further notes that an influence of global imperialism in the name of a rights-based approach culminated in Nepalese politics taking on various forms such as decentralization, and the trickle-down development approach, in order to distribute power and resources. However, still the progress of women and their involvement in various sectors was very limited. The state power holders and policy makers along with constitutional monarchy had ignored the issues, such as identity of women as full citizens, caste and ethnicity, language, gender, class, regional and religious diversity, which had forced the Maoists to go into conflict against the elite ruling parties of the time (1996-2006) demanding a new constitution for the establishment of peoples' 'sovereignty', 'democracy', 'rights' and 'social justice' through the logos of New Nepal (Yami 2007).

In the first reinstated parliament (2007), the Interim Constitution of Nepal officially transformed the country from Multiparty Constitutional Monarchy to Federal Democratic Republic. In fact, the Maoist initial strategic plan was to destabilize all the existing old political residues of the time. However, in spite of earlier strategies, the Maoists accepted a multiparty parliamentary system with federal states by restructuring the Constitution as a new authorized agency. Apparently, this led to the same old fashion of occupying a seat or "*Kurchi*" a satirical local term for power/authority rather than serving the people's basic needs to transform their daily lives. Arturo Escobar (1952) explored the real situation of how theorists and political discourses provide opposite positions in their strategy and failure of development. Similar confusions and experiences have been encountered in Nepali politics and political situation as noted in the following quote by Escobar:

The fact that most people's conditions not only did not improve but deteriorated with the passing of time did not seem to bother most experts. Reality, in sum, had been colonized by the development discourse, and those who were dissatisfied with the state of affairs had to struggle for bits and pieces of freedom within in it, in the hope that in the process a different reality could be constructed (Escobar 1992: 5).

Indeed, implementation of theory in Nepali society is still in the hands of a male authority and ontology in the same old-fashioned manner, whether it is at home or in the state mechanism. Thus, this paper seeks for a new epistemology and ontology according to its context refusing to take for granted the concept limiting women to household work and depriving them of participation in other professional areas including formal politics and political decision-making processes. Cross cultural anthropologists as well as feminists have argued a complex intertwinement of sex, gender, caste and class. More importantly, regarding political decision-making, anthropologists seem very conscious about social abstraction that constitutes a number of 'parts' to be made 'whole' where every part is an important aspect of a whole. Their views on representational norms seem far different to that of formal state policy norms. Thus, the number of codes and sub codes reside and resemble the number of variables to form a 'whole'. Since then informal and formal relations are always a part of the final outcome of any consequences, especially in the phase of women's transgression which has always been feminist battle ground (Rai 2008; Federici 2012; Padia 2011). In this light, a major research question to be explored is: What are the hindrances or barriers that hold back women from politics and political decision making if the country is heading towards a gender equality regime through a 33% quota?

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

The notion of *Ghardhandha* and its relational structure discussed in this paper are illustrative of the complicated gender egalitarian theory in view of contemporary representative quota politics. Though gender quota policy itself emerged through feminist thought to break the gender stereotype considering the growth in the number of women in political positions, yet politics is male-dominated both in number and influential political positions all over the world.

However, from 2008 and onwards, Nepali women have been entering higher political positions, most notably because we now have a female head of state, a female speaker of the parliament, a female chief justice and so on, but their presence at the top has not been able to bring constructive changes in the lives of common people, who are performing *Ghardhandha* in their own traditionally stipulated manners. Hence, disagreements arise especially when the elected party or candidates would not reflect on people's everyday needs through their electoral representation, which indicates that political representation at the top through existing formal state electoral norms (institutional practice) does not necessarily have empirical consequences. Electoral practice is still gender biased and the quota system is only a way to meet the number requirement, rather than understanding the complicated informal structural relations that need redefining and restructuring for achieving a society based on equality. To be able to carry out a proper analysis and draw a conclusion, one should consider various motivational factors that influence *Ghardhandha* which is strictly divided between male and female responsibilities. It indicates thus that politics is not straightforward and transparent.

To examine the complicated layers of *Ghardhandha* one needs to understand how people communicate the subject of context and relate it to their own situation. The locus *Ghardhandha* comprises a number of political constituents which seem beyond current practice of politics. The past experience of earlier generations has been continued in the present and will continue to carry a number of questions for the next generation.



Ghardhandha as a genealogical institution thus seems not free from political constituents and power relationships. For instance, marriage is a most essential part of *Ghar* that explicitly defines and infiltrates the personal by social norms, but because it should be registered according to state legislation, it also belongs to the political sphere. In a similar vein, *Ghardhandha* carries the political sphere of power where duties and rights, advantages and disadvantages are distributed among the household members. In this sense, the modern feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ seems true. The slogan carries a critique of the traditional liberal separation between political or public sphere - that is, government and politics - and the personal or private sphere - that is family and personal relationships (Chambers 2012). Likewise, modern politics is an exercise of power. This is seen virtually everywhere as an aspect of human behaviour and activities (Dahl & Stinebrickner 2003). In so doing I will discuss some of the cases briefly to challenge feminist thoughts of egalitarian gender theory and analyse why contemporary representative politics are deficient in a number of ways in particular situations.

*Ghardhandha* performed by women seems crucial in terms of uplifting the household economic status through subsistence agriculture or given limited resources. Most of the village households at Longh Kahli and other parts of country are being evaluated according to how properly they have performed *Ghardhandha* and, thereby, also *Ghar*. Basically, they do not look at the sources of income, whether it be from the labour market abroad, agricultural production or so. More importantly, one should have followed strict household informal or traditional economic rules as these dispositions are viable for reproducing other goods and services today and in future, but due to failure to capture its reproductive social relation in the contemporary formal political and economic arena, women’s rigorous informal dedication especially at home and field seems unnoticed. Nepal is an agricultural country and about 70 % of its people are engaging in subsistence agriculture. Of these, about 80% are women with poor economic status (Ghimiry Niraula 2014). The status of women in my setting is also more or less the same, though, these days, people are also engaging in foreign remittance, government service, small tea and grocery shops and home-stay-business. As Silvia Federici (2012) claims, Marx and his followers seem blind in class struggle since the housework labour power of women has never been included as reproductive work in the process of capitalist economy. Hence the impact seen in the *Samajik* notion, which I call an embodied class, is seemingly bound up between the contemporary monetary system influenced by western norms and strong social practice characterized and defined as *Ghardhandha*. To many women this connotes something unworthy, but inevitable as indicated by one interviewee: ‘sitting at home but never having free time’. Though the country has already embraced a 33% gender equality policy in all public sectors, the tendency still seems persistent since only few middle class and privileged families are able to influence the formal power sectors. On the other hand, their private behaviour seems strongly governed by customary laws that they belong to and hence they behave accordingly in a disproportionate manner while making everyday decisions. Everyday decisions are still being made in the context of ‘*Samajik*’ and informal *Rajnitik* terrain of everyday politics guided by social and cultural customs where *Ghar* is considered the most fundamental grounding. In this sense, *Ghar* represents the conceptual basis for informal politics and appears to be a local sovereign parallel structural body, equal to national state government, which further extends to the larger part of the national arena. This was evident not only in the two historic Constituent Assembly elections held in 2008 and 2013 but also paradoxically in the first part of the local election recently conducted in May 2017 after twenty years of stalemate.

Most interlocutors’ general understanding in regard to politics was out of their daily domestic and social observations, which they colloquially termed ‘*Kurchi*’ (also used to indicate dissatisfaction towards politicians). Most of the villagers repeatedly said: “whoever has gone

'*kurchi*' has done nothing except fighting to hold it for high position for their own and the party's sake rather than to fulfil people's daily needs". Their daily affiliations to household activities that call for the existence of reproductive power relations in various social domains to which my interlocutors called '*Ghardhandha*' seem to be a rather neglected political discourse. The present practice of *Ghardhandha* in *Longho Kahli* village and Pokhara thus includes the past knowledge of practices within changing notion of the present, and yet continued by the process of accumulated old practice onwards to the future.

The term '*Ghardhandha*' used repeatedly by interlocutors during the conversations confirmed that their body and mind seem already prepared for this practice to be continued for many generations to come. However, at the same time, the earlier practice of shifting to the lower fertile land for subsistence farming or the earlier tradition of maintaining *Ghardhandha* to fulfill the family's basic goals and maintain social household status within hamlets and village territory also seems to be slowly changing.

Except for a few middle class female politicians, most of my interlocutors experienced that they were never free from '*Ghardhandha*'. Instead, they had to undertake a bigger burden after adding politics into their lives. Many female politicians have emotional memories of how they had to leave their young children alone at home to serve their party in various ways. In many cases, they were accused and were even held under police custody on charge of doing anti-government activities during Panchayat regime and political insurgencies. Kamala aged 48 could not hold back her tears as she said:

While I was in police custody during Panchayat regime my three young children were at home all by themselves and my youngest one was only one and a half years old who required daily breast feeding. My husband was in Kathmandu in his own driving profession ... but these days no one cares about our contributions and sufferings.

Like in Kamala's story, when such a dedicated service as loyal activists came to an end and when they returned back to normal life, their family and house works were acknowledged much and they were once again back to their *Ghardhandha*, while their male colleagues became leaders and position holders. There are many such females who served in regional and national politics whose careers got lost in the process.

Durga B.K. and Krishna Pariyar, who were both former members of the Constituent Assembly from 2008 to 2012, made a similar statement about their poor economic status, but a very different marital relationship experience: "[...] daily life is so hard these days without any stable income. I spent all my energy and time for the party since my childhood and had only basic formal education [...]". Durga B.K. was on maternity with a baby boy who was just born during her election campaign in 2008. Her husband is also a fulltime political cadre in the same party. So, she would not have any objection from her husband and her natal family to be involved in party politics. However, in the case of Krishna Pariyar, who has four children that are all grownups, she now fails to have good relationships with her husband and being separated with her four children, having shelter in her natal home. Such is the plight of a female politicians and an indication of how a woman has ultimately to come back to *Ghardhandha*.

Whereas the concern about *Ghardhandha* would never become a similar case for a male member in the political arena, be it in the party or at home, as it constitutes a different kind of authority and power asymmetry. Power sharing norms seem controversial, not only between husband and wife but also among consanguine relations within families, which sometimes creates conflict and unification but is distorted in the notion of '*Ghargrihastha*' and '*Samajik*', a partial and relational process of power sharing (Gray 1995).

Thus, clearly domestic practice is a fundamental basis for both male and female from where social and political asymmetries occur through everyday practice and reproduce general forms of implicit and explicit discrepancies that have dynamic and relational consequences. In the essence of such political practices regarding caste, ethnicity, class, gender and universal human rights, there is a deficit, or in some senses mutual controversy, since women's role in *Ghardhandha* appears to be an inextricable part that I observed and have reflected on in this ethnography.

Nepal has changed drastically in its political system especially after the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006). Policy of gender inclusion from international interventions via NGOs and INGOs were in the ideal of capitalist neoliberal strategy in the guise of women development, poverty alleviation, human rights, inclusion of marginalized groups in mainstream politics, but the position of commoners in the villages and even in the urban areas still seems miserable in the current economic frame. Most of the young women seem frustrated with their daily lives. New and old generations are involved in traditional and modern practices and are trying their best to adapt to new lifestyle forms to perform *Ghardhandha*. The present practice of *Ghardhandha* in *Longho* village and Pokhara thus includes the past knowledge of practice within the changing notion of present and future continued by a process of accumulated old practice. It follows that males need economic earnings to support their so-called dependent family members who have shifted to the fertile lowlands for subsistence farming and small business. Most of the villagers' primary goal of migration is to search for the best economic opportunities in the national and international labour market. Very often the female migrants then go to Pokhara and its peripheries for better schooling of their children while also taking care of all housework such as caring for children and senior citizens, doing subsistence farming and taking care of pets and cattle, in the absence or presence of a male partner. To maintain *Ghardhandha*, early marriage of a girl child is still an ongoing practice in *Longho Kahli*, although it is an illegal practice since the Nepali Constitution has made the eligible marriage age to be 20 for both boys and girls.

Seeking modern occupations for livelihood seems common in the young generation. However, with only a few exceptions, there is still a strong traditional belief that compels many to have no choice other than being '*GharkoAama*'. Traditional roles and responsibility regarding division of labour are strictly gendered and predominantly conceived as being domestic. In some instances, it is also observed that family members are encouraging their daughters/ sisters to receive higher education so that their daughters/ sisters may not have to stick to '*GharkoAama*' (housewife/mother) like their wives and mothers.

### 5. Samajik vs. Rajnitik: an opponent reality

In many instances, *Ghardhandha* is a term interchangeably used to symbolize women's household works in the notion of *Samajik* for female gender. It is also *samajik* to perform early childhood marriage to enhance reproductive role and perform *Ghardhandha*. Thus, it is a socially and culturally valid practice communicated as such within household members regarding both gender, kinships, neighbours, villagers and larger society as a whole, which is embodied in a disproportional manner in practice and seems to be an embodied constraint both in mind and body (Jacobson 2011). This sort of embodied phenomenon can also limit women from other basic formal foundations of life processes such as education, business, health, employment and so forth (Acharya 2014). The majority of people believe in the term '*Samajik*' for representing social unity or solidarity, whereas '*Rajniti*' seems a matter of conflict and destructive to social harmony. Thus in many local instances conflict can be seen if a person does not follow '*Samajik*' norms which means that one should first and foremost be loyal to structural family relations and other relational aspects such as groups within hamlets and villages. Secondly, electoral-based partition politics, which they term *Rajniti*, seems to fulfill socio-political formalities governed by the state, whereas

women's labour as *ghardhandha* represents an ongoing ritual in everyday practice.

Despite the intentions of the national Constitution in terms of gender rights, one can easily observe how far it has been implemented in daily practice. During the Interim Constitution drafting process, no women were included. It was only after a revolt by a group of women activists that four women were finally included in the committee. However, the paradox and rhetoric of politics also could be seen in the behaviour of the leaders as they followed the same tradition of preaching in one way and acting in the other way. As most of the common people in my settings stated:

All leaders say that they will address our 'sorrows and pain' that we have been going through since long but nothing really happens to ease the pain. Their false statements always fill our ears during election campaigns while they step our doors but after winning the election and getting the *kurchi*, they become deaf and dumb to our problems.

These sorts of statements indicate that although the structure of the electoral process is supposed to be live up to democratic norms, social justice and peace, in reality it is just a buffet for arming personal wealth and power for politicians. Moreover, democratic norms and values seem contradictory and unlikely to produce substantive change in ordinary people's everyday lives. This might indicate that changes made on the top level do not necessarily reflect or address the bottom reality.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite a 33% quota provision for women in policy making in all sectors, true transformation of everyday life still seems remote in practice. Unless males and females are treated equally in all informal practical aspects, the representation of women in the public arenas would be just a token rather than a real progressive act. There should be high attention on the very first socialization process of both gender and in handing the skills of *Ghardhandha* in a balanced way to end gender discrimination. Representation in the public sector for both men and women will be difficult unless intertwined relationships alongside *Ghardhandha* and nuances of everyday practice are given genuine consideration in the current economic and political framework. In some sense both males and females seem subversive, due to cultural and contemporary capital market policy; at the same time patriarchal mind sets are far from meeting formal equality requirements because of its never ending partiality. This sort of practice definitely leads to a new global demand from the next generation 'to cultivate a new habit' for practical purposes. In this sense, feminist claims about multiple gender politics seem to require further analysis, seeing that conceptual differences in changing political notions remain divided. Hence, women's formal political representation from local to national politics would not reveal its landscape if its social dynamics in relation to everyday practical battles are neglected in the process of analysis. The data from my field and the related literature show that politics is not straightforward worldwide. Yet, the nature of oppression, historical mutilation, and process of constructing knowledge systems has been very different in the third world (Padiya 2011; Channa 2013). The relationship between, sex, gender and substantive representation of women remains complicated (Childs 2006).

In this sense, politics is an exercise of power influence which has been structured paradoxically and ambiguously (cf. Gotfredsen 2013). Representation of politics - not only state-imposed formal politics but also women's experiences of daily life within and between the membership of '*Ghar*' and '*dhandha*' (i.e. both male and female) – thus all have reproductive relations via uncertain and regular activities, such as communication and network, knowledge from neighbourhoods, kinships, personal and public relations, engaging in meetings and seminars and

so. All of these activities could not just be politics, but in some sense beyond politics whereas decision-making relies on all kinds of processes in given situations within 'Samajik and Rajnitik'. As Chandrakala Padia, Subhadra Mitra Channa and many others have encountered in the roots and lines of differences or in the favor of third world's diversity where they claim sexuality should not only be defined through 'gender'. A predominant assumption of liberal or neoliberal feminist worldview would not be found solely in my text nor can be applied to the women of South Asia (Channa, 2013). Their happy survival depends on leading a collective and interdependent life at all levels (Padia, 2011).

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